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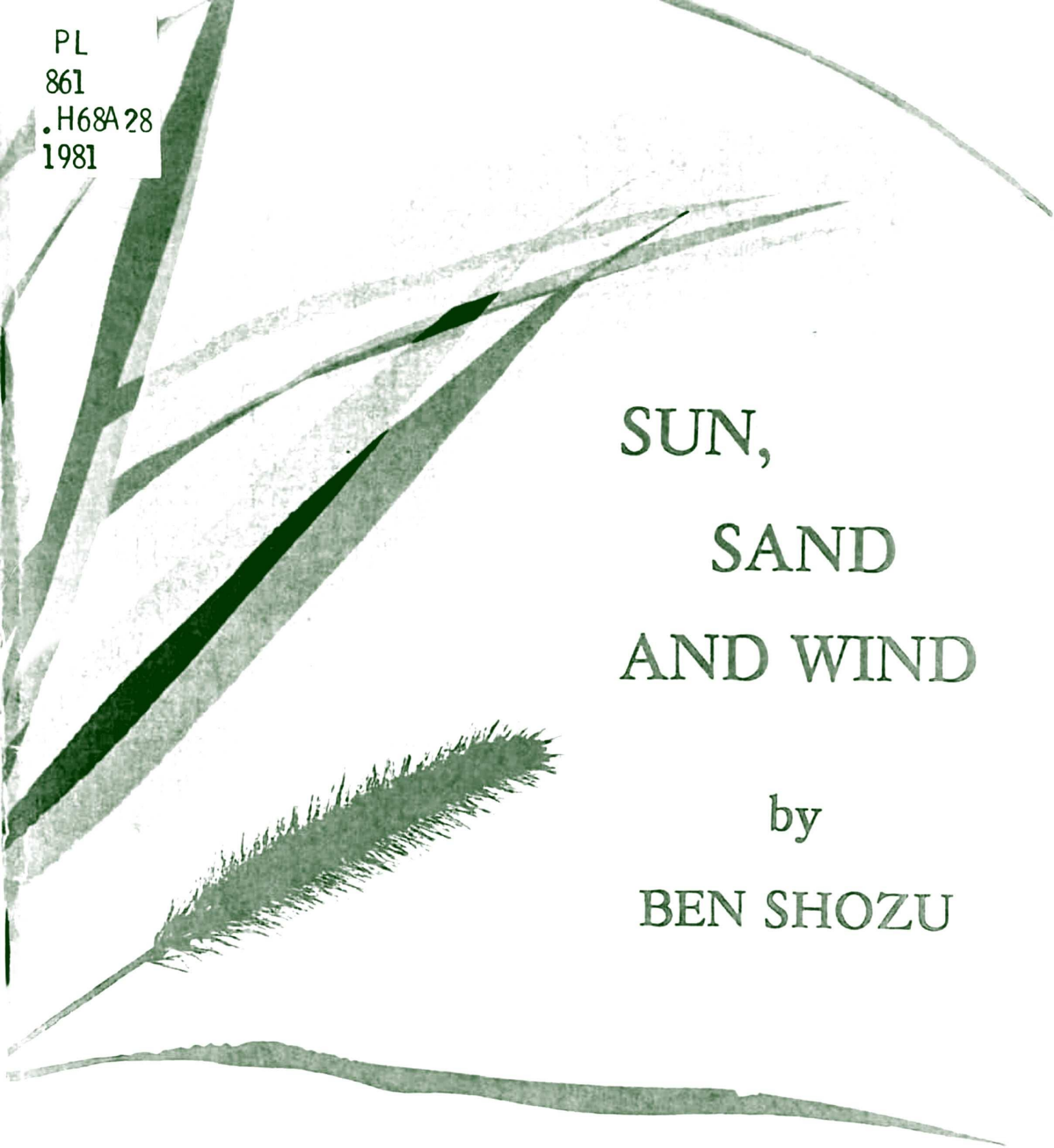
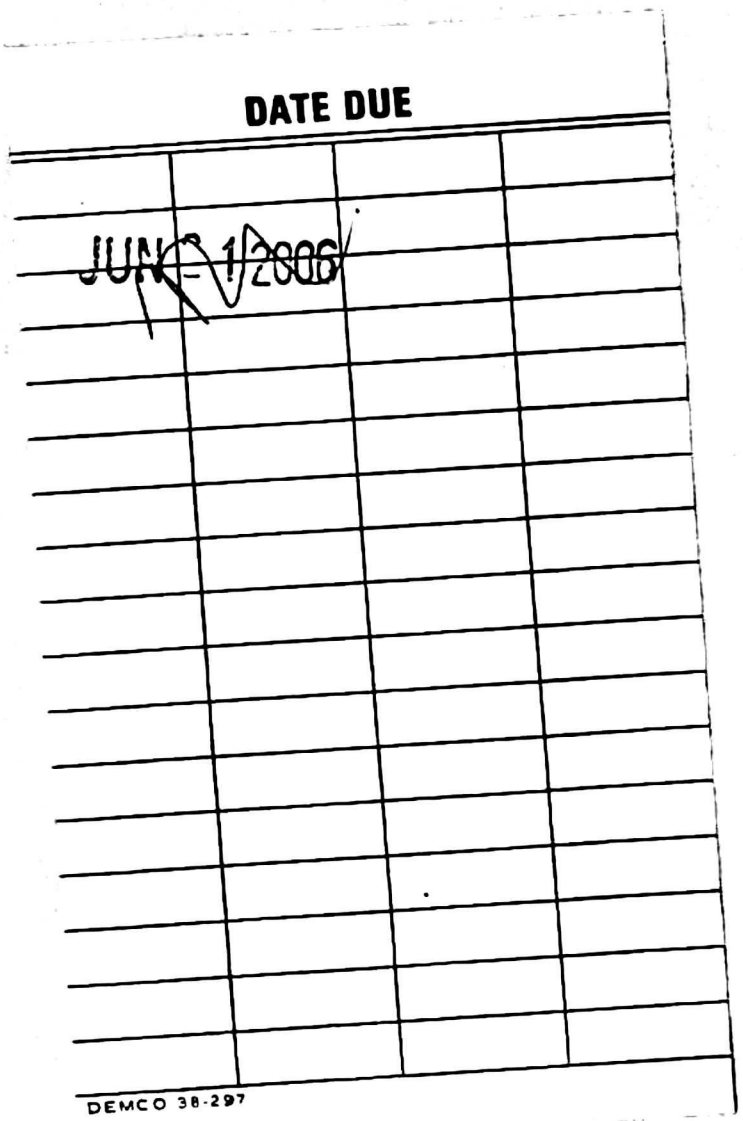


SUN, SAND AND WIND

by

BEN SHOZU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SUN, SAND AND WIND

by

BEN SHOZU

Translated by Robert Wargo
Isabelle Charnov
Brian Wideman

Designed and Produced

for

The Office of the Provost
The College of Arts and Sciences
The Area Studies Program
The Department of English

of Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan

by

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1981

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A Katydid Book

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Ben Shozu – spokesman of the streets, a young angry poet sensitive to the pathos of everyday life, and the people usually neglected by poetry. Impelled by a strong disaffection with hidebound tradition, Ben is conscious that, to be modern, tradition must be rethought or reexpressed in modern terminology. He communicates a certain conscious violence in man's nature, his sexual relations, the violence masked by the ideal of romantic love, the difficulties in human communication and the problem of self-image. He is concerned with the problems of man in the modern world such as urbanization, mechanization and dehumanization, and he shares much of this concern with poets like Ginsberg, whom he admires. Yet he is not a mere anti-modernist poet.

In his early period, which culminated in **Blue Sky**, *violence and the confrontation with naked emotions, especially the darker aspects thereof, were paramount in his mind. The impetus for this lies in his own background as a student of the 60's – aware of social contradictions, concerned with the hollowness of established values and the belief that social status and material progress would bring happiness. He feels that the dream has undergone a horrible transmutation, and materialism has brought only a stifling of values along with loneliness, confusion and a sense of isolation. The structure of modern society negates, almost inadvertently, man's humanity by making him "rational" and free of emotion except in prescribed patterns. For poets like Ben, who saw what was happening, this provoked a desire to move in the direction of greater freedom, and to produce emotions strong enough to make themselves aware of their own existence as human beings.*

This urge to feel strong emotion and the desire to make others do so as well seems to be taken by the poet as a precondition of becoming aware of oneself and the nature of the society in which one lives. The reaction against tradition seems not so much to be a reaction against the poetry and literature which became that tradition, but rather a reaction to the fossilization, the deification, the stultification of what was originally enormously powerful and humanly moving. Enshrined as a tradition, literature becomes merely decorative, soothing and static, the appropriate decoration for the house of a modern rational intellect. Only by directly attacking this shrine of the past could the poet clear the way for directly feeling the broad spectrum of emotions which interweave in human life.

But mere railing out and destruction of the past, ossified though it may be, is not enough. The grunts of a neanderthal may be expressions of deep and violent emotion, but they are not poetry. Ben Shozu's confrontation with the past and with the more demonic aspects of human nature is poetry precisely because he forms and expresses his emotions – the rage, the frustration, the remorse, the guilt, the self-indulgence, and even the joy – in a careful, tightly woven and geometric form.

However, tightly structured or not, a poetic expression which is exhausted in shock tactics and negativity cannot long continue to hold the attention of a reader, nor can it gain for the poet admiration as a spokesman of humanity. Ben Shozu's poetry is clearly not exhausted in negativity. His assault on tradition and the new perspective on intimate human relations are tools he feels necessary to shape a more realistic and deep appreciation of humanity.

The present volume, I believe, exemplifies a growth or evolution in Ben's poetry, not merely a reversal of roles, but a growing into a fuller multi-dimensional view of the human condition. The

final four poems in the collection come from his earlier work **Blue Sky**, *which has been acclaimed as a radical statement of youthful revolution, and about which the critic Nobuo Ayukawa has remarked that it provides a negative portent or warning concerning the plight of man in the modern world. Ayukawa writes . . .* "**Blue Sky**, *however, is a vision of the poet as a whole, which once arrived at is hard to leave behind . . . And so, the poet as ultra-masochist shoves a stick of dynamite up his anus to destroy himself, and momentarily catches a vision of the splintering blue sky . . . For an instant the world becomes visible. Only immediately before or after such a moment could a poem such as this be written.*"

The violence and lashing out referred to by the critic are not apparent in the last four poems in this collection selected from **Blue Sky**. *A remnant of that violence, disgust and loathing, however, can be discerned in some degree in "Corpses" and "Maggots." These poems attest to the fact that the violence and intensity of Ben Shozu's commitment to the exploration of the human psyche has not abated. It should be noted, however, that Mr. Ayukawa, rightly I think, dwells not on the obviously destructive aspect of what is Ben Shozu's most violent poem, but rather finds in the poem as a whole and the book to which it gives its name, a catalyst for a positive vision. One need only look at these four poems to be aware of the intense sympathy and deep understanding that Ben Shozu has for the forlorn, the downcast, and those forgotten in the stream of modern technological life.*

It is hard to read "Oho" without feeling a complexity of diverse yet integrated emotions running the gamut from amusement through pity to fear. In fact "Oho" is a very funny poem but one which is at the same time reflective, both in the sense of having a serious point and in the sense of making the reader aware of the emotions he is experiencing. This motif of humor and reflection is an important element in Ben Shozu's poetry, for example in "Sneering." Sardonic detachment from one's own obsessions is a tool which he employs frequently. As he says with a certain degree of satisfaction, "Ichiro Murakami called me the poet who compiled a book of poems with 'self scorn' blazoned across it in gilt capitals." Here again, however, the 'self scorn' is not merely an expression of emotional self indulgence but a cathartic purgation.

The bittersweet reflective nostalgia of "Scattered Clouds" brings forth a flood of images and emotions in each reader at once both tender and painful. The simplicity of structure and charm of "Maki" beguile one until one realizes the tragedy of a young waif slowly having her intellect and humanity eroded as she tries to catch a whiff of freedom in the fumes of intoxicating glue. The tragic nature of the scene is made all the more horrible by the beauty of the way in which it is expressed. Moralizing is not apparent and indeed if it were, the effect of the poem would be much less profound. I think, in fact, Ben Shozu's poetry is most effective when his moral stance is not explicitly stated.

"Mami of the Port" exemplifies this absence of moralistic tone quite strongly. The story is tragic, if perhaps not uncommon, but the poet tells the tale from the viewpoint of the girl who has been through these experiences. Just as she can no longer judge whether her various memories are recollections or mere phantasms, and just as she can no longer feel except through recollections, so too the poet and the reader do not judge Mami nor can they feel abstract or ideologically based emotions. One comes to feel with and through Mami; the sensitivity of the poet as well as his deep affection and concern manifest themselves not in direct pronouncements, but in his enabling the reader to enter Mami's world. This sensitivity can hardly be categorized as mere scatology or as

mere negativistic rebellion as some of his critics have tried to do.

But neither is it mere sentimental moralizing. And indeed it could be argued that the self-indulgence of some of his poems, the intensity of the emotions confronted in and through them, is precisely what was necessary for the delicate balance achieved in poems like "Mami."

Ben Shozu is a poet who is growing. He is exploring new areas of emotion using, as it were, delicate tints and light brush strokes where before he had mainly confined himself to broad sweeps of dramatic lines. The poems from **Oh Grass and Trees Forever Be** *include elements of both the lyrical and even rhapsodic found in "Goodnight Spoon Goodnight" and "Just Like a Picture by Seurat," the near demonic outpouring of "Maggots," as well as a whole emotional spectrum in between. He experiments with emotions not in a detached and objective or scientific manner, but by enthusiastically throwing himself into the emotional perspectives with which he is experimenting.*

Even this in a way sounds a bit too distant and calculating to describe what seems to be happening in the landscape of his poetry. Perhaps it would be better to say that he now allows himself to be overwhelmed and absorbed by a fuller range of emotions than he had before.

Yet, although he has widened his emotional range, he has not lost sight of the necessity for tight structure. Much of his poetry in the original Japanese is arranged on the page in very specific geometric shapes, dictated not by some external manipulation of the printed words, but by the length of the lines that comprise the poem, and even the pattern which emerges from Chinese characters he uses. This purely physical design is very difficult to translate into another language, even though the translators have been somewhat successful in conveying this in a few of the poems, i.e. "Sneering" and "Maki."

The structure of his poetry is also very strongly affected by his fascination with cinematography. Quite often it seems that he conveys emotion and hints at what he wants to say by drawing a verbal picture or a series of pictures which link together in the manner of a film strip. Stanzas then can act as scene changing mechanisms in the case where there are no immediate links between them, and as more subtle shifts of focus when such verbal links are supplied. The tendency to use the graphic arts, both static and dynamic, to serve as a structure is not universal in his poetry, but does seem to be a strong characteristic pattern.

The technique is interesting both because of its being, as it were, a step-child of modern technology and yet at the same time because of its having some very strong and essential similarities with techniques used in traditional poetry such as the haiku. Consider, for example, a poem such as "Counterlight." The poem as such is based on a scene from an Alberto Moravia novel and the characters actually say very little, and most certainly do not overtly give vent to strong outbursts of emotion. Yet one senses the underlying tension and miscommunication, the lack of contact, doubt and coldness. The feeling, and even assurance, that one knows precisely what the situation is between these two individuals is heightened by the beauty and delicacy of the description of the environment around them. It is almost as if one were viewing a movie where the camera had focussed on two people and then as they talked shifted its focus to the natural setting, sometimes in exquisite detail. It is in fact this juxtaposition of precisely that conversation with those studied glimpses of nature that make us the readers experience the relationship between the man and the woman, rather than simply being told about it.

In haiku also we find that the juxtaposition of two strong, contrasting, concrete images which work on each other in an immediate and dynamic fashion causes the reader to see and feel those

images as elements of his own experience, and with them the myriad nuances, associations and complex interplay that make up the stuff of life.

This technique allows for, and even demands, a curious and yet intense relationship to be established between the poet and the reader. Poems structured in this manner do not seem susceptible to exegesis or detailed inquiries into the author's frame of mind or his philosophical perspective. They are to be experienced and that experience is with each individual, at least in the best of cases, whole, complete and unique. This is not to say, however, that each individual can choose to experience what he or she will at random. The poems form a matrix which the poet and the reader immediately share and yet this experience belongs only to the individual having it. The emotions felt upon reading some of the poems may not be pleasant, as for example, the disgust one may feel on reading "Maggots," but they are felt and their intensity is such as to demand their being attended to. His poetry can make us feel emotions, even those which we might not wish to countenance given our conceits and our ideological outlook on ourselves and the world in which we live.

This drawing of a connection or a sympathetic vibration between Ben's poetry and haiku is not to say that he was consciously or unconsciously indebted to that tradition for his poetic style. Rather it is to say that he has constructed a style which, not surprisingly, is in consonance with the spirit which developed the tradition of the culture in which he grew up. In fact it is only in recent years, it would seem, that he has been able to look upon the past traditions as a largely unexplored reservoir of human emotive expression. He has found links with the past, links which were formed naturally and without conscious intent. He still feels, however, that unless the patina of age and authority which covers most of the real human expressions so exquisitely perfected by the classical poets and writers is penetrated, that unless those classical works are reexpressed and recreated in modern language, they will be incapable of moving, or speaking to, the majority of those living in modern society.

This, he believes, is a tragedy, for the classics have become classics precisely because of their enormous power, appeal and depth of human feeling. Thus, in his attempt to "bring poetry to the streets" he has very consciously selected subject matter which would speak to a large number of people. In this respect again there is a strong similarity to the democratization of poetry which it has been said accompanied the introduction of the haiku and the homely subject matter and images found therein. "Mami," for example, was written in response to a request by a popular singer for a poem to be made into a rock ballad. "Goodnight Spoon, Goodnight" appeared on billboards throughout the subway system in Tokyo, and "Seurat" adorned the cover of a popular monthly magazine, **Tokyo no tabi**. *Moreover, he has been actively involved in the development of a rock interpretation of a classical Bunraku play written originally by a popular writer of the puppet theatre in the 18th century. As time goes on this ability to come to terms with classical literature without having to confront it on the one hand, or capitulate to it on the other, will continue to add depth to his poetry. I think the selection of poems in this volume gives an indication of that transition as well as being good poems in themselves.*

The poems in this volume were selected by the author and the translators partially to give an overall picture of the flow of Ben's poetry, and partially to coincide with the publication in Japanese of a new volume of his poetry **Oh Grass and Trees Forever Be** *which he composed for the most part while Poet in Residence at Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, under a grant from the Fulbright Commission in the spring of 1981. While at Oakland Ben participated in the ad-*

vanced Japanese language class and the two students in the class, Isabelle Charnov and Brian Wideman, and I thought it would be a marvelous opportunity to work on Japanese literature with the author himself present, and perhaps even use some of the translated poems in the public readings that Ben would be giving. The process became so interesting and rewarding for all concerned that we decided to publish this small volume. We have tried insofar as we are able to translate the poems into idiomatic and poetic English while retaining as much as possible of the form which had been so much an integral part of the original Japanese. The one element which unfortunately we were not able to convey adequately in English was an element of Ben's poetry which he rightly regards as exceedingly important. Namely, the sound of the words themselves.

For all of his interest in almost geometric structure, balancing and counterposing concepts, Ben's poetry is essentially made to be read aloud. It is living poetry and as the Japanese character for poem intimates, these poems are songs. The extensive use that he makes of onomatopoetic words and the attention that he pays to the sounds of the vowels and consonants in each phrase give his poetry a power which transcends that of abstract imagery, for example the sounds of pigeons cooing or a teen-ager sniffing glue. In public readings audiences who understood nothing but English would often remark on the forcefulness of the reading, but even more surprisingly on the direct emotive understanding, the intuitive communication that they felt during the reading.

In any case the putting together of this book has been an exciting and gratifying experience for all of us involved with it, and I along with the other two translators should like to thank first of all the author for his many hours of patient and considerate suggestions while we were translating the poems. We should also like to express our deep gratitude to Hiroyuki Sato, Christian Flood and Tetsuo Kinoshita for their permission to use their drafts of translations of some of Ben's poems as a reference for us.

The cover was designed by Elaine Charnov and we are indebted to her for her generous contribution of time and artistic sensitivity. In addition we should like to thank Bonnie Foote Abiko for her assistance, suggestions and patient advice concerning the translations and the overall production of the book, and Ruth Rounds for typing the numerous drafts and for her perceptive comments.

Finally, we should like to thank the Office of the Provost, the Dean of Arts and Sciences, the Area Studies Program, and the English Department for the financial support of the volume which is the second in an Asian Poetry in Translation series started by Oakland University. Needless to say, this volume could not have been created if it were not for the generous and much appreciated financial support jointly given by Oakland University and the Fulbright Commission. This support allowed Ben Shozu to be the second participant in the fledgling Asian Poet in Residence Program at Oakland which is directed by Professor Thomas Fitzsimmons of the Department of English. Professor Fitzsimmons is the founder and editor of the Asian Poetry in Translation series, of which this book is the second, as well as the guiding force behind the Poet in Residence Program at Oakland.

Robert J. J. Wargo
Oakland University

REFLECTIONS

残光

GOODNIGHT SPOON, GOODNIGHT

For Ewa

Goodnight spoon, goodnight
I cradle you tenderly in my palm
What can I possibly whisper, I no longer know
There's nothing in my hand but a hollow oval.

Goodnight spoon, goodnight
I touch you lightly to my tongue
What can I possibly hope for, I no longer know
There's nothing on my tongue but an empty cavity.

Goodnight spoon, goodnight
My love has forgotten me
Where could she possibly be, I no longer know
But that's alright, that was another life. So goodnight
Goodnight spoon, goodnight

JUST LIKE A PICTURE BY SEURAT

Just like a picture by Seurat
In the late afternoon of the end of this century, melting in the sunlight
filtering through the leaves
The birds smooth their wings and nestle in the branches
The children scatter color
Gently fading into the trees.

Just like a picture by Seurat
In the late afternoon of the end of this century, melting in the sunlight
filtering through the leaves
The puppies cuddle under the nipples of their mother
The men and women become talking porcelain figures
Reflected on the surface of the water.

Just like a picture by Seurat
In the late afternoon of the end of this century, melting in the sunlight
filtering through the leaves
The tender things of the world, just as they are,
Ready to blossom and sing out
Into the weave of nature's tapestry.
Just like a picture by Seurat

A SUMMER'S DEATH

ある夏の死に

COUNTERLIGHT
JULY, WOMAN AND MAN

The woman carves off a corner of an ice
And sets the spoon cool and gentle on her tongue.
The light falls warm
And comes to rest, peacefully, on the downy undersides of leaves.

"All morning what did you do?"
"I took a walk," she replies.

The man raises his hand to shade his eyes, gives the woman a glance
Then fixes on the plate with artificial colors floating in
artificial water.
Bringing along with them a langorous quiet
Distant voices of children reach their ears.

"Where?"
"Around and about."

The woman gently picks up a corner of her napkin
And with it ornaments her rouged lips.
Weaving a dotted rainbow, the sprinkler keeps turning
Spraying the wild rose and green ferns with shimmering life.

"Around and about. Where?"
"The main street."

She bites the words, unconsciously tapping the spoon on her teeth.
The tap-echoes persist and the man draws the spoon from his mouth.
Just then after an almost endless climb up the table leg
A lone ant finally has his goal in sight.

"So, what did you do?"
"I took a walk."

*The dialogue in this poem is taken from an Alberto Moravia novel.

DOG DAYS
AUGUST, MY GIRLFRIEND AND I

Midnight, there is no crying of sea birds nor roaring of the sea
The 750's naked and exploding in the night air
By morning have all scattered and gone over the dunes.

I WATCH
A coke from the cooler, my chin resting on a towel
Leaning back in a beach chair, cradling a beachball on my stomach
Clenching my teeth, chewing a straw
A low deserted diving board, a swarm of warning flags
The bobbing lifebuoys, the spotted sun, and soon
The phosphorescent plankton will weave a glowing pattern in the oiled sea.
And then, knifing back to shore from beyond the surging waves
My girlfriend pauses
Drawing back, she seems to call out to me
Her joyful palms raised high above the sea.
I WATCH

Midday, there is no crying of sea birds nor roaring of the sea
The tearful, crippled dogs of the boathouse
By morning have all scattered and gone over the dunes.

COLD RAIN
SEPTEMBER, YOU AND I

The rain got harder
Curtains torn and wind-whipped
Pastel mints piled in a glass bowl
The floating vines part and tasseled summer grasses bend.
Slowly rolling out of the garage
Curving down the winding path
The driverless sedan.

YOU
A Tarot card flung under one elbow
Cutting the cards, dealing the cards
Blouse creased taut
From behind your back, the last card
You finally reveal
And hear

I

A glass pressed against one cheek
Clinking the ice, swirling the ice
Necktie choked taut
Into my mouth, the last cube
I slowly swallow
And hear

The clouds hang gray
Hurtling down the highway
Tires cutting hot into the night, until
As if floating alone in the dark sea
On the surface of the windshield glass
Struggling futilely to complete their arc
The wipers twitch and . . .

TAILSPINS

転落

CORPSES

The woman's, and then mine
Arms extending, hands encircling, first gently,
Like master and darling cat, darling cat and master

Collapsing on the sofa, curling in the air
Wrestling back and forth, finally cradled
In tender embrace. One slipper

Slowly, softly, then the other
Abruptly, suddenly, strongly, the woman to me
No, I to the woman

I to her, but wait —
Thumb to thumb and nail to nail, digging in
Both of them, the woman to me

The woman to me but wait —
Thumb to thumb and nail to nail, digging in
Both of them, I to her

Throat to throat, pressing there, that
Single spot, arms stretched taut, then flung away
Four of them. Heaven doesn't care

Voices loud, loud as possible
Sounds of panting slowly fade. Then at last, here,
Is formed the graph for "death" itself —

Below a single line of pillow
Touched back to back, numbed and still
These hunks of flesh.

NOTE: The ideograph or character for "death" in Japanese is which looks like two bodies sleeping back to back with a bar (pillow) over their heads.

SNEERING

The man sneers
At this very moment
That he is like this
That he is merely like this.

Squeezing and crushing the woman
Being squeezed and crushed by the woman
What is this we're doing?
What is it we think we're doing?

Sensualism? No, nothing that banal.
It's just that whatever you want, whatever you do
You can't stop the doing, like the need to urinate
It's there, it's satisfied, that's all.

Urged on, thrust up
What am I doing? Simply wasted effort
That's all. Enough now. Enough of that!
But end up doing it after all.

What is it we think we're doing?
What is this we're doing?
Being squeezed and crushed by the woman
Squeezing and crushing the woman.

That he is merely like this
That he is like this
At this very moment
The man sneers.

MAGGOTS

Backbone to backbone, thigh to thigh, split in two, greasy sweat
Coating bodies arched back in ecstasy

Thorax and thorax, bared, expanded, thrust up
Nostrils wide, nostrils flared

Palate and palate gaping, inhaling fast, exhaling fast
Temporal vein and temporal vein distended, parietals bulging

Synchronously eyeglobe and eyeglobe eating into eyeglobe and eyeglobe
Toward neck and neck, arm and arm, arm and arm, four limbs reaching

Trachea and trachea clutched in one pair of hands, two pairs of hands
mutually kneading and wrenching
Strangling each other, arching back, twisting away

Angrily tumorescent, vertiginous, convulsing, eyeglobes glowing white, four
Hump-back and hump-back swelling large

A vise clamped tight, mud-smeared, eyeglobes oscillating left and right
Lumplike expansion and contraction, two maggots

INVERTED IMAGE

I.

The sunlight had already begun to retreat, escaping through the blinds
Moving as if by plan, cutting the set on a diagonal
Leaving solitary in dark background the table and chairs
And thrusting into the foreground's bright illumination, a bed.

For some time the two had been floating there
Seated opposite each other, silently tearing bread,
Silently cutting meat, hair falling down
Round mutually bowed heads.

Sound — the incessant hum of fridge and cooler
Broken by the clicks of the digital clock
The stereo merely fills the eye
The soundless is heard but the speakers are silent.

Lighting — projected by the silent TV
A dancing square of light on the far wall
This flickering image and nothing more
The invisible is seen but the lens is dark.

II.

Setting her knife on the plate, she
Softly touches meat with fork and lifts it delicately to her mouth
Setting my knife on the plate, I
Jab at a piece of meat, fork clanging.

Picking up a spoon, she
Glides it slowly into the soup and lifts it gently to her mouth
Picking up a spoon, I
Splash it in the soup and . . .

Over and over again the same moves
Unable to bear anymore, I peer at her
In those seconds both knife and fork
Slide slowly through my unknowing fingers.

She stares down at me
Sounds a well-mannered cough into her cradled palm
And with glass raised in one hand
Slowly dabs the napkin on her rouged lips.

III.

"Hmmm. Have you had enough?"
"Enough. No, not yet, not yet."
"Then go ahead, have more."
"Sure, more, more, and more."

Not yet! More!
I pull up my chair, arch my back
Seize the knife and fork
And flaunt them, flashing in my half-raised fists.

She starts, wide-eyed and open-mouthed
Shoulders hunched in feigned surprise
Not to be outdone, I fill my cheeks with chunks of meat
And lustily chomp down.

But then a moment later
The meat mashed between my teeth seems to be my own tongue
Juice dribbles from the sides of my mouth
An idiot stare from between propped elbows.

IV.

Necks bent and twisted between protruding ribs
Beaks rip-pulling their own entrails
Then as wings thrash and torsoes shudder
Exploding skyward the beaks raise high the bilious mass.

Throats ripple as the clots are swallowed down
With golden eyelids open they gaze in mutual ecstasy
Suddenly the sounds of hurried gulping
And in revulsion they jerk away, two savage birds.

With their encrusted chain-mail legs and hook shaped claws
Slimy, visceral tubes and sacks bulging, writhing, breaking loose and away
Their blood spurts and gushes forth
While the feathers dance upward to the sky.

"One morning a fellow prisoner eating his breakfast beside me
All of a sudden dropped his bowl and fell into his final sleep."*
In the midst of putrifaction, quotes like this take form out of nowhere
Like belches burbling forth from my lips.

*From Yoshiro Ishikawa's essay, "Kakunin sarenai shi no naka de."

V.

"Did you say something?"
"Yeah, errr No, nothing."
"Well then, are you ready?"
"What, so soon?"

Ready? So soon?
I knock over the chair, snap to attention,
Up roll my eyes to show her the whites
Stagger back in mock fear
And I can't quit.

"Stop it," she cries in a strangled voice
And hurls a napkin at me
Infinite emptiness seeps into the white caressing my face
And I can't ignore it anymore.

But I don't know if beyond this gluttony and lust
Like a fan fluttering down from the hands of a dancer
That light awaits me which would make worthwhile
The death for which I so earnestly long.

MUSINGS

默狂

OHO!

Oh, a lark, a lark in the sky, Oh!
Oh! Oh, Oh, Oh!

Oh! me, jumping, soaring high, a perfect smash
Oh, what form, what form!
Trousers flutter flapping, lighter sputter spurting
Ah, the branches, Ah look up at the branches, ahh!

Ah, would that be a ride! But!
But!! But, but, but,

But retreating, retreating, four steps, five steps, but
Eye measuring the trash can's height
Searching out a rope, a proper noose
Neck in, feet off, yeah. Yeah! Yeah?

Huh, huh, what, what!
What! What, what, what?

What is this? A slippery hanging chain, a swing
Chain. Can you hang on a swing?
Can you? Can't you?
Go ahead, do it, hurry up, do it.

Come on, come on, go ahead, do it.
Do it! Do it, do it, do it.

I'll do it, jeering and stretching my neck forward, I will
I'll swing, sway, swing with my mouth wide open
Vomiting, gobs of vomit, gobs, no way to stop
Gobs and jeers without stopping, on and on.

Oh, a lark, a lark in the sky, Oh!
Oh! Oh, Oh, Oh!

SCATTERED CLOUDS ALWAYS IN MIND

I.

Wild chrysanthemums
Clop-clip the carriage
Flop-flip the awning
Scattered clouds always in mind
Lucky Strike sailor[1]
From one pack of Glico[2], a candied promise
But the runner stumbles at the tape of tears
Never to return, Kah-bo[3].

II.

Wild chrysanthemums
Clop-clip the carriage
Flop-flip the awning
Scattered clouds always in mind
From across the sea, the Emperor's voice
"Endurance, patience, to death and beyond."[4]
But the drums of Tenri[5] lure the converts
Never to return, father.

III. Wild chrysanthemums
Clop-clip the carriage
Flop-flip the awning
Scattered clouds always in mind
Sad Yunta[6] folk song
A flutter of celluloid blossoms curtain the bath "Cherry Spa"
But soon, all fade into the hail and snow
Never to return, mother.

[1]American Occupation forces.
[2]Inexpensive postwar "caramel of champions"
[3]Affectionate name for the author's brother.
[4]From a wartime patriotic song.
[5]"New" religion, simple in doctrine and earnest in faith.
[6]Okinawa folk song.

MY OLD FASHIONED LOVE SONG

古い恋唄から

MAKI, THE GIRL OF GOOD-BYES

In a plastic bag soo-ah
In a plastic bag soo-ah

O.K.
It's O.K.
I said it's O.K.
I made it O.K.
So
Why how who cares
Really because now . . .
Maki

In a plastic bag soo-ah
In a plastic bag soo-ah

No
No way
I said no way
I made it that way
So
Well then like this no sense
A waste because now . . .
Maki

In a plastic bag soo-ah
In a plastic bag soo-ah

I forgot
I forgot it
I said I forgot it
I made myself forget it
Sorry to good-bye so long
No need because now . . .
Maki

In a plastic bag soo-ah
In a plastic bag soo-ah

*This poem is about one of the young teen-agers who used to indulge in the fad of sniffing glue from a plastic bag in Shinjuku station, Tokyo, in the late 60's and early 70's.

MAMI OF THE PORT

Stockings on a curtain wire
Pigeons on a verandah cooing
Currr-uuu and currr-uuu

And curr-uuu
Mami, you were thirteen when you lost it
Not in love, no, not in love but . . .
Zipped down leathers, slicked back hair
"Hey, Mami," No, Yon, quit it now--no
"Mami!" Staring strong, chewing hard
"No, you're saying no?" What a fool!
Without warning, belt-whip in hand
"No, Mami? Still say no!"
Yon what're you? Really Yon, no.
Mami--has really had it
"Mami, say what you want, yell if you want
But you know how it goes."
No Yon, quit it now, no
Stop--no--stop. Just like a movie
Flick, flick, things happen
Scenes come, scenes go, nothing more

Stockings on a curtain wire
Pigeons on a verandah cooing
Currr-uuu and currr-uuu

And currr-uuu
Mami, you remember nothing
Scenes come, scenes go, the story grows
Somehow it seems, all of it seems
Like a dream, just like a dream, but . . .
Yon, listen Yon!
Mami will be your whore, whatever you ask
Your baby's all I want, your baby, Yon's baby
Oh please, oh please! No, I can't? No?
Pleading, pounding, sobbing
"You little fool!" Light slap, stinging cheek.
Suitcase in hand, happy and off to the Springs
Gaily dressed, skipping light, leaving a show in the park.
Things like that, funny things
Seemed to have happened – or only in my mind

Stockings on a curtain wire
Pigeons on a verandah cooing
Currr-uuu and currr-uuu

And currr-uuu
Mami, you were sixteen when you drifted into port
Didn't like it, no, you didn't like it but . . .
Yon, you fool. Why all those girls?
Then a brawl, slash and smash, get sent to the farm
And Mami deserted like a poor widow
Just hanging around, didn't like it at all
Tankers pulling into port, ambulances
Rushing down the streets full speed, "Hey,
Mami!" Hey, they shout, dumb sailors
Grinning wide, pockets full
Mami, handbag swinging around
Sailor! Hey sailor hurry
Come on, come over here, I said
Hurry up, hurry up! Just like a movie
Flick, flick, things happen
Scenes come, scenes go, nothing more

Stockings on a curtain wire
Pigeons on a verandah cooing
Currr-uuu and currr-uuu

And currr-uuu
Mami, you remember nothing
Scenes come, scenes go, the story grows
Somehow it seems, all of it seems
Like a dream, just like a dream but . . .
Sailor, hey sailor
Mami'll give you a good time, anything you want
Just give me a hit, sailor, I need a fix
Please! please! A fix or I'll die
Stoned, swaying, retching
"You bitch!" Hot cigar burning my thighs
Razor bloodied wrists, slashed on the steps of the Marine Hospital
In damp and dirty slip dragging home down Pier Number 3
Things like that, funny things
Seemed to have happened--or only in my mind

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